

# REMINISCENCE

## Finding Meaning in Memories

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### What is Reminiscence?

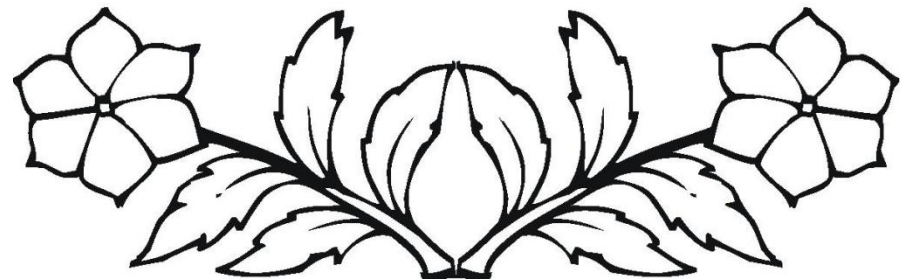
“If I hear Mother tell that story one more time!” Familiar words. Indeed, it was once thought that the tendency to dwell on the past was unhealthy, perhaps even a sign of senility. In recent years, however, there has been a growing recognition that reminiscing, also called “life review,” is a normal and important part of growing older.

The handing down of family history from one generation to another has always taken place. But with the more mobile and busier family of today, we need to make special efforts to provide our elders with opportunities to reminisce.

Taking time to listen to another person reminisce gives the powerful, unspoken message that “Who you are, what you have done, and the things you care about are very important to me. I believe in you; I accept you; I want to know your story. And, even more, I receive what you have to offer as a gift.”

### Why Is It Important to Reminisce?

In the later years of life, people can come to terms with events and feelings they may not have had time to reflect upon and think through when they occurred. The opportunity to reminisce can help our elders unlock what may be long forgotten resources within themselves. Remembering a time when they felt strong and capable, when they overcame problems, made difficult choices, or dealt with losses, can again fill them with a sense of power and capability.



In fact, research has shown that older people who undergo life review are less withdrawn and apathetic. Reminiscing promotes mental and emotional well-being and combats isolation, loneliness, and depression. The process helps older persons get back in touch with things that matter to them and again experience positive feelings about themselves.

Once in a while, reminiscing can cause too much emotional upheaval, stirring up painful memories that have been put to rest. If this happens, reminiscence might not be appropriate for this person.

## How Can I Help Someone Reminisce?

Reminiscence isn't difficult. To make it happen, you need only be a caring, interested, and sensitive listener. Here are a few tips on how you can help someone reminisce:

- Keep in mind that reminiscing is not an orderly process nor accurate. As Mark Twain said, "I find that the further back I go, the better I remember things, whether they happened or not!" One memory triggers another in a way that may not seem related. It's not important to keep things in any order.
- As the listener, you are responsible for the flow of the conversation. Keep the conversation focused on the feelings surrounding events rather than the events themselves.
- Be attuned and sensitive to the older person's capabilities, needs, and feelings. Some days the person may be able to reminisce longer than others.
- Keep the conversation focused on the person reminiscing, but don't hesitate to share some of your own memories that relate to the situation being discussed. This is referred to as paired reminiscence and is a good technique for drawing out the other person and making him or her more comfortable. Always remember your purpose is to focus on the other person and what he or she has to say.

- Allow silence and emotion. The speaker may need quiet moments to collect his or her thoughts. Memories may cause tears to flow - allow such emotions - they are normal and natural. Simply accept them. These moments will pass quickly.

### Benefits of Reminiscence

People who reminisce together:

- create a sense of continuity, linking accomplishments of the past to the present.
- find out interesting things about each other or a period of history.
- preserve family history.
- transmit cultural heritage.
- communicate family folklore and legend.
- build self-esteem.

## Skills and Tools for Reminiscing

Triggers are words, objects, music, etc., that spark memories. Triggers that appeal to the senses can be very effective - the smell of popcorn, or the feel of crayons or a soft blanket. Take note of things in a person's home or room and their potential as triggers.

Consider the following as possible triggers:

- **Photographs** - focus on personal photos or ones from the period of history being recalled.
- **Memorabilia** - anything from a candlestick brought over from “the old country” to a childhood book or toy.
- **Historic events** - ask questions dealing with an historic event such as the Depression or World War II.
- **Family occasions** - direct the session to a recollection of birthdays, weddings, etc.
- **Reading** - use short stories or poems about the past.

### Steps for Reminiscing

- Think of some open-ended questions you might ask to start the conversation.
- Listen actively. Maintain eye contact, use your body to communicate your acceptance and attention. For example, lean slightly toward the listener, nod your head, don’t interrupt.
- Respond positively. Give feedback by making caring, appropriate comments that encourage the person to continue.
- Ask follow up questions. Restate key points to indicate your understanding, to clarify what has been said, or to guide the conversation.

There are times when a person might dwell on one particular story. You can avoid repetitive memories by helping the person get to the root of the story. Help find the

real meaning and resolve it by getting beyond the actual event. Ask questions such as:

- *How did you feel at the time?*
- *What else was going on at the time?*
- *Who else was involved or was present at the time?*
- *How did they react to you? Were they helpful?*
- *Did anyone notice your reaction to the event?*
- *Did anything happen as a result of this event?*

Another technique for avoiding repetitive memories is to use positive triggers, such as:

- *What was your favorite playtime activity as a child?*
- *What games did you play?*
- *What was the happiest birthday you can recall?*
- *What was the best present you ever received?*
- *Tell me about your best friend.*

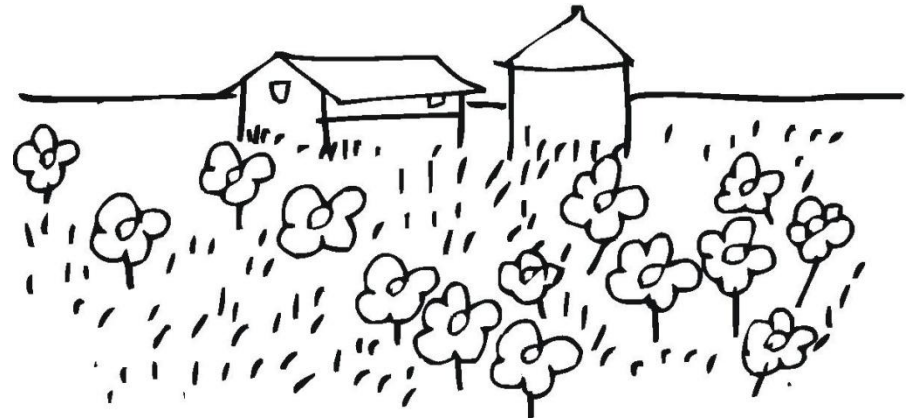
Often simple acceptance and support from the listener can help the person stop dwelling on one memory.

The open-ended question is the most important tool and the one that will guide the reminiscence. The possibilities for such questions are endless. One question may be enough for an entire session. Consider using some of these:

- *Do you know the meaning of your family name?*
- *How did your parents meet?*
- *What was the first house you remember like?*
- *What were your favorite foods as a child? Where did the recipes come from?*
- *What were your neighbors like?*
- *Did you have any pets as a child?*
- *What advice did your parents give you? Did you hand down that same advice to your children? Why? Why not?*
- *What is the biggest difference between your childhood and that of your children? Grandchildren?*
- *Have you ever received a special honor or medal?*

Reminiscing is a positive activity for both the listener and the speaker. It can take place in a variety of situations including family settings and nursing homes. It may be appropriate to have scheduled reminiscence activities in clubs, organizations, and classes.

“Once I really sat down and listened to Mother’s story and asked her about it instead of shrugging her off, she told me so many things I had never known. It made me see my mother in a new way and we went on to share many other stories.”



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